



Andrew Heslop speech  
Saatchi & Saatchi campaign launch  
The Rocks, Sydney  
Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2008

Thank you for such a great introduction.

Mr Premier, Lord Mayor, distinguished guests, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen.

Firstly may I start by sincerely thanking Simone Bartley, CEO of Saatchi and Saatchi, not only for her hospitality this morning but for agreeing to put her company behind Neighbour Day. In what is now Neighbour Day's 6<sup>th</sup> year, Simone's generosity to commit people, time and resources to encouraging more Australians to have better relationships with the people next door and across the street is simply magnificent.

I'd also like to pay tribute to the creative geniuses - Executive Creative Director Steve Back and Creative Group Head David Bowman - who came up with the campaign you will see today, and to Sasha Orr and Ali Klujin, who also coordinated, cajoled and convinced actors, crew, editors, producers and the award winning director Matt Palmer to give their time, creativity and talent .... for no fee.

There's also the residents of Toongabbie and Pendle Hill to thank too ... they let Saatchi's take over their homes and gardens three weeks ago. Such was their trust in the rough idea sketched out to them they left the keys to their homes with the crew to come and go as they pleased.

To you all, thank you very much for agreeing to take the message of Neighbour Day to more Australians in more streets and more towns across the country.

For reminding Australians that the community you want starts at your front door.

In 2001 Australia was still basking in the afterglow of the Sydney Olympics, a remarkable event that touched the lives of people all around the world, not just the residents of Sydney, whether you were a sports fan or not.

It showcased Australia to the world, and what a great opportunity that was.

In early January Victorians were still talking about Steve Bracks' 1999 election victory over Jeff Kennett, Federation Square would not open until October the following year – way past the 100 year anniversary date of the Australian Federation, residents were still comparing real estate prices with Sydney and the horrors of September 11 were yet to unfold.

Oh, and there were protestors still complaining about the Grand Prix at Albert Park Reserve.

Just metres away from McKinnon Station on the Frankston Line, 75 year old Elsie Brown secured herself in her home. Separated from her husband, she kept in touch with the world through daily newspapers and, most likely, talkback radio ... probably 3AW. The world came to her, but only at her invitation.

Sometime in May, Elsie – known to some of her neighbours as Betty - locked the doors and settled down on the sofa, wrapping a blanket around her. She was never seen again.

Around 14<sup>th</sup> March in 2003 Victoria Police broke in to Mrs Brown's home after Melbourne Water contacted a neighbour about a bill which had been unpaid for two years. It was still connected though ... along with the gas, the electricity and the phone, all unpaid.

Inside the officers found Mrs Brown's remains, still wrapped in that blanket, on that sofa. Nearby was mail and newspapers from May 2001.

When Heather Gallagher and Susan Murdoch wrote about Elsie Brown's death in The Age the next day, local man Maurice Hadley said –

*When I was a kid we knew everyone in the street by name. Now you can live in a place for 27 years and you only know your neighbours on either side. I reckon it's an indictment on society.*

Well, Maurice Hadley was right. It was an indictment on society and it shocked Melbourne – from the other residents of McKinnon Road, McKinnon to the respectable ladies of genteel Camberwell, Hawthorn and South Yarra right through to the hard working battlers in Werribee, Bacchus Marsh and Broadmeadows.

But it wasn't only genteel Melbourne that was shocked. Radio news bulletins across the country were joined by widespread nightly television news and daily newspaper coverage of the lonely death of an elderly woman, locked away in her home for two years. Entombed.

Talkback radio erupted in a cacophony of concern and outrage from other senior Australians concerned at what could happen to them. It was, they said, their worst fear ... dying in their home without anyone knowing.

It was hard not to miss this story and it was hard not to be moved by the sad end to the life of Elsie Brown.

I'd never met Elsie Brown ... but I'd met many like her ... at Australian Red Cross where one of our services was Telecross, a free telephone monitoring service delivered by volunteers.

Simply, it's a pre-arranged call to mostly elderly and vulnerable people at a specific time every day – and if the call goes unanswered an emergency plan is activated.

A plan that might have saved Elsie Brown's life ... or, at worst, have prevented her lonely death from being major national news two years later.

Fast forward to January this year when the body of Jorge Chambe was found in his Yagoona home. Mr Chambe had been dead for 12 months before anyone bothered to check on him. Go back days earlier and a 70 year old woman discovered in her Belmore home.

Rewind to 2006 when five people, in quick succession, were discovered dead in their publicly owned homes in Sydney.

Go to the Gold Coast last March when Carl Linden's remains were found. His neighbours had called the council about his untended garden and its haven for snakes. They called the police who knocked and knocked but there was no answer and they went away. Instead the council came out and did the garden. Eventually the neighbours insisted something must be wrong so the police came back, broke in and found that Carl had been dead for a year and a half.

I could easily go on. But you get the picture. Except for 25 year old New Farm, Brisbane man Bernard Smith. Bernard had been undergoing treatment for cancer when he died, alone, at home and was not found for three weeks ... and only then because of the smell from his unit. His real estate agent had turned up a week before to see why his rent had been unpaid, left her card and went away. But no family ... friends ... neighbours ... work colleagues ... or medical practitioners had reported his disappearance – or took action out of concern for his well-being.

In almost all of these situations ... and in many more which have been reported in the media ... there has been one recurring theme.

When the neighbours are inevitably questioned by the media, their stories are almost universally the same –

We knew the deceased lived alone.

We knew the deceased was vulnerable.

We'd seen the mail ... the newspapers ... the store catalogues ... and whatever else ... pile up around the letterbox ... the front door ... or in what once was a garden.

But we did nothing.

Why is that?

Have we, as a nation, become so self-obsessed that we only care about whatever happens in our immediate lives ... within the confines of our home?

Have we stopped caring about anybody else?

Have we lost the ability to interrelate with the people who live around us?

After being alert and sometimes alarmed, are we so distrusting of anyone we don't already know ... anyone who is different ... anyone strange ... anyone not like us ... that we immediately put up an impenetrable barrier?

Are we just too suspicious to care about anyone who might be outside of our personal comfort zone?

I hope we haven't ... and if I'm wrong, and we have ... I hope we can fix it. Soon.

It might surprise you but I'm 38 years old – and I grew up in Adelaide.

My mum walked me to the shops. She walked me to school. She walked me to the park or the beach from my grandparents home.

Along the way, we would talk to the neighbours, having a nodding or passing acquaintance with a range of people up the street and around the block. We'd do the same thing to get to the supermarket ... the train ... or the local deli for some milk or bread.

Today, we instead drive out of our maximum security homes with alarms, and bars, and window shutters for either a service station kilometres away on a major arterial road or the nearest Westfield Shopping Town, where we park and enter an air-conditioned chasm devoid of natural light – or natural food.

Architecture ... planning ... technology ... have cocooned us in our very well appointed, climate controlled and sometimes fashionably appointed homes.

We talk to someone we have never met in the flesh who lives on the otherside of the world and sometimes share our most personal secrets.

But what we don't do is easily talk to the person who lives just metres away.

Some of my dearest and closest friends work on the nightly public affairs programs who have carefully crafted a well-researched program aimed to appeal to both audiences in large numbers and advertisers, with large cheque books.

Here, one of the standard stocks-in-trade is suburban crisis! Communities under siege! Stories that every person who has a house with a roof should be shocked by. But often it's not real, just manufactured flim-flam whose sometimes controversial guests are never paid for their interview, but whose car loan or house repayment, or maxed out credit card is reduced significantly by a magic transaction.

What fun to work on this kind of show!

But along with sometimes controversial talkback radio, we're led to believe our streets are unsafe. That it's dangerous to walk around – by day and by night.

It's a nonsense of course. But if you stop walking on your street, and give in to this manufactured danger, you are setting the stage for opportunists. And that's when the real problems begin.

Last April I left Melbourne to come to Sydney and work for RailCorp – and I have to say since doing so the support for, and interest in, Neighbour Day has grown considerably.

I've always been very lucky ... I have always had great neighbours. Sadly, my 91 year old neighbour from Albert Park in Melbourne died late last year. When I moved in to the street he and his partner Joan were welcoming. Then, Clive was in his mid-80's. He would wander up and down Finlay Street bringing in the wheelie and recycling bins to everyone's yard on Monday morning after collection. He would get the mower out and fairly much do 50 metres of nature strip and edging on both sides of the street.

Clive would lend me tools and instruct my attempts at being a handyman. Our front door was always open, hinged back so as not to slam shut in the drafts, but he would knock and never enter unless I called out.

We were neighbours when Elsie Brown died. While I was moved by her death, I was inspired by Clive, and Joan, who ably demonstrated you could be a great neighbour without becoming intimately involved in everyone's lives.

So I wrote a Letter to the Editor of *The Age*, suggesting the last Sunday in March be set aside as 'National Check on Your Neighbour Day'.

It struck a chord and the ABC was the first to jump, via Jon Faine in Melbourne.

But how does one go about setting up a day?

From my experience working for Australian Red Cross I knew full well how hard it was to run awareness campaigns, fundraisers, marketing programs. I knew that 8 May was World Red Cross Day because it was the birthday of the Founder, Henri Dunant.

And I checked the UN's calendar of official observance days ... and came up with nothing.

But did I need to register with someone, somewhere ... maybe government ... to have a day?

Did I need to get permission? From someone, somewhere? Some bored public servant who, today, would be spending their working life updating their Facebook profile or watching downloads from YouTube.

Well, thanks to the magic of Google I found Australia didn't have a Neighbour Day. It has many other days, many, many of them aligned with essential fundraising activities that keep charities alive and give kids breakfast when their parents don't, but none as far as I could tell with five simple aims –

1. To strengthen communities and build better relationships with the people who live around us.
2. To create safer, healthier and more vibrant suburbs and towns.
3. To promote tolerance, respect and understanding.
4. To break down community barriers.
5. To protect the elderly, the vulnerable and the disadvantaged.

So I decided the last Sunday in March would be Neighbour Day, for two reasons –

Firstly, March was the month in which Elsie Brown's remains were found ...

And because it would fall in to daylight saving, for the places that observed daylight saving, allowing neighbours to bond into the night over a barbie, street cricket and perhaps that most useful of games ... totem tennis.

The journey here today has been long and at times, disappointing.

But it's been one that has been guided exclusively by television, radio and newspaper journalists around the country. Everything from Sunrise to the Young Witness.

You see there's never been one cent of corporate, commercial, government or public money poured in to Neighbour Day.

It exists on the web because a company called Ripefruit in Melbourne gave me a content management system to publish whatever I liked. So I bought the domain name and designed the logo – which incidentally means N for Neighbour Day but in lower case is a house.

Apart from that, it's been the overwhelming interest of journalists around the country who have built the grass-roots community foundations for Neighbour Day.

Yes, there have been approaches by the corporate sector to 'support' – in inverted commas – Neighbour Day. But really it's just been an opportunity for them to sell more ice-creams, mobile phones or hammers to consumers.

There's nothing wrong with that, of course. But when someone says we'll give you a healthy six figures to make it the Ansett Australia Neighbour Day – I made that client up – it doesn't fit with me when organisations, like Australian Red Cross or The Smith Family, struggle to attract this kind of money to give a nutritious breakfast to a hungry kid. Or provide them with a new school uniform so the other kids stop labelling them 'povvo' because the toes in their shoes have been kicked out or the shirt is worn or ripped. Or they don't have a jumper or a coat to keep warm in winter.

Call me old fashioned ... but I see nothing wrong with having a good relationship with the people next door and across the street. I see nothing wrong with walking – that being unfashionable too – and talking to people along the way.

What I do have a problem with is when I see people interviewed on television mostly, about the death of an elderly and vulnerable neighbour, who say 'oh, we all keep to ourselves around here. It's used to be friendly, but not any more. Yeah, I wish I'd done more now'.

Well in 2006 Kofi Annan agreed with me and pledged the UN's support to take Neighbour Day worldwide. Prince Charles and Bill Clinton have done so too.

In fact Prince Charles called it a 'most splendid initiative' and made his assistant write that in fountain pen and underline it for effect!

This year, Morris Iemma, Anna Bligh, Alan Carpenter, John Brumby, Peter Batchelor, Mike Rann, Jay Weatherill and Jon Stanhope all agree. Across the country communities and individuals are also in agreement, with local activities ranging from Community Coffee Carts in Leichhardt to major festivals on opposite sides of the country - Mackay in Queensland and Perth in the West - taking place.

And that's in addition to whatever you do and what the people who see the television commercial do.

Joining the Premiers are Clover Moore and her interstate colleagues John So, Campbell Newman, Michael Harbison and the City of Darwin to encourage Australians to get to know their neighbours. Plus local Mayors and Shire Presidents who have read, heard or seen something about Neighbour Day and want to integrate it into their communities.

Now the challenge is to get the Australian Government to support the concept of Neighbour Day, to work with fellow members and accept the UN's invitation for it to become an official UN Observance Day which could lead to an International Year of Neighbourliness being declared at some point in the future.

Neighbour Day exists because it has captured the imagination of ordinary Australians, because I think it returns to some traditional Australian values such as tolerance, respect and understanding. Because it encourages us to care.

No one service or program can ever stop people dying alone in their homes. That would be impossible. But what I hope Neighbour Day does, in years to come, is to develop and foster our sense of community, to improve the relationships we have with the people next door and across the street.

As Premier Morris Iemma has said this morning –

“Whether you live in a house or an apartment, in the city or the bush, knowing your neighbours actually strengthens your community.

“It gives you a sense of belonging and provides reassurance that there are people you can call upon to help out in an emergency or crisis. Neighbour Day is a great initiative because it encourages us all to get to know the people who live around us”.

He’s right.

We all want to live in safe communities.

We all want to live in suburbs and towns that are vibrant and happy.

We all want to live where the people are friendly and supportive.

We all want to have good relationships with the people who live around us.

Saatchi & Saatchi’s work takes us closer to that.

After all, the community you want starts at your front door.

TVC – will go to air on

Qantas, Nine, Network Ten, SBS, NBN, WIN, Prime, Macquarie Southern Cross,  
Austar and Imparja

Seven and Foxtel to come ....